

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the award of a Master's Degree
in Management from the NOVA – School of Business and Economics

Influencer Marketing: A Qualitative Analysis of Factors Motivating Online Purchase Intent

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January, 2019

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents who taught me that anything is possible if you truly set your mind to it. I owe all my accomplishments to you. To my sister, Annika, thank you for being the best role model and friend. You taught me to always give 110% in everything I do. Next, I'd like to thank my life partner Michael for being my biggest cheerleader in life and for always believing in me. Finally, to the life-long friends I made at Nova SBE, you made this journey an experience of a lifetime and I could not have gotten through it without your support.

Abstract

Over the past few years, influencer marketing has become one of the biggest focal points for marketers. It is important for companies to understand the drivers behind consumer online purchase intent, so they can partner with the right influencers and continue to reap the benefits of influencer marketing. These drivers were explored through 15 semi-structured interviews. They were analyzed against the Source Credibility Model using the Gioia Methodology. Preliminary results from the study include three aggregate dimensions as the main drivers of online purchases: **Perceived Benefit, Degree of Risk, and Group Identification**. Degree of Risk was found to be the most important determinant of online purchase intent, and perceived risk was higher when considering making purchases through smartphones, also known as mobile shopping. Therefore, in order to curate an effective influencer marketing strategy, we suggest for companies to properly vet influencers prior to entering a partnership, engage in constant and open communication, and to consider partnering with affiliate apps to make mobile shopping more convenient and lessen the degree of perceived risk

Keywords: Influencer Marketing; Online Purchase Intent; Social Media Influencers

1. Introduction

It is estimated that the average global internet user spends 1.72 hours per day on social networking sites (Bennett, 2015). This number continues to grow, with monthly active users around the globe expected to rise to 302 billion by 2021 (Statista, 2018). Social media has become so engrained in our society that it has changed the way we interact with one another and how we exchange information. Not only do we use social media to maintain existing friendships and relationships, but now we even use it to create new ones. Due to the increasing screen time we are getting per day, combined with the rapid innovation of technology that allows us to access these social networking sites at any moment of the day, there has been a drastic shift in the entire media landscape. As such, companies and marketers alike have had to rethink how to effectively reach consumers and how best to leverage the existence of social media to expand their reach.

Prior to the emergence of the internet and social media, celebrities were strategically selected to endorse companies' products and sway consumers to purchase their products or influence brand perceptions. While we still see celebrity endorsements today, it is less common of a practice, and their overall influence is waning (D'Cruz, 2018). In the past, we only saw well-known figures serving as brand ambassadors, but today they are being replaced by the average consumer. This has led to the emergence of a new type of opinion leader; the social influencer. The social influencer is someone with a large following that interacts with brands and creates their own user-generated content (UGC) to spread messages to consumers (Martensen et al., 2018). Influencer marketing is seen to be a cost-effective way of driving sales and influencing consumer behavior and brand perceptions (Sharma, 2018). The influencer comes in many forms; 'The Youtuber, the Blogger, or The Instagrammer,' depending on the social media channel that is being used, and they are paid by companies to promote their products (Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018). Influencers have become so prominent on social media and they have

proven to be highly beneficial for firms, driving increased sales and competitiveness in the market (Konstantopoulou et al., 2018).

Influencer marketing is a new phenomenon (Litterio et al., 2017) that first gained its popularity through Instagram, a visual based social media platform (Martensen et al., 2018). While in the beginning influencers were few and far between, the potential for monetary gain has driven enough success to turn “social influencer” into a full-time job. As a result, competition has gotten so strong and the influencer market has become highly saturated, making it a daunting task for companies to select influencers to work with (Booth & Matic, 2011). As more companies reach out to social influencers to partner with, more pressure gets put on the influencer to drive sales and push products. This has led to an increase in promotional content that we see on channels like Instagram (Mark Kilgour et al., 2015). Influencer marketing has become an intriguing topic of research for marketers, and we have begun to understand the intricate dynamics between influencers and firms. However, there is also a need to understand the complexities of the consumer and drivers behind online purchases in this context. This is necessary for influencer marketing to continue to be a successful for companies.

1.1 Research Question

The aim of this research is to understand the factors that motivate online purchase intent driven by social media influencers on Instagram. It seeks to investigate the intricacies of the relationship between the consumer and influencer from the consumer’s perspective, which will explain the motivation behind following these opinion leaders and study what drives consumers to make online purchases. Thus, the overarching research question that will be addressed in this study is the following:

RQ: Which factors motivate influencer-driven online purchases?

2. Literature Review

Existing literature about the topic of influencer marketing is limited in nature, particularly regarding the consumer reaction and perception of social media influencers and their content. In order to provide context for this study, the literature review will first address Word-of-Mouth (WOM), which can be defined as the exchange of positive or negative statements about a product or company. It will also address electronic WOM (E-WOM), where traditional WOM takes place online (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Next, it will discuss the rise of social media, the social media influencer, and the review will conclude with Online Purchase Intent and Mobile Shopping Adoption.

2.1 Traditional WOM and E-WOM in Marketing

Traditional WOM has long been studied by marketers because of its important role in shaping consumer purchase decisions. Traditional WOM involved the exchange of information between consumers about their opinion and perceptions of brands and their products/services offline and in an informal manner. The topic of electronic or (E-WOM) emerged because these discussions had begun to take place online, changing the context in which these exchanges were formerly made. They now take place in online forums, opinion platforms, news groups, among many other channels (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). With the emergence of the internet and the social media networks sites that have come along with it, E-WOM now involves a larger audience and is conducted on a much broader scale. WOM is particularly important to study because it can impact firm performance by shaping brand perceptions, having the potential to either harm or maintain its reputation. Research has shown that consumers want to participate in WOM for several reasons, including economic gain, to increase their perceived self-worth, and to fulfil their desire to be socially active (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). While traditional WOM has

always played an important part in shaping consumer perceptions, in the past decade it has become more important than ever, as we are surrounded by an increasing number of informal communication channels such as text messaging, e-mail, the internet, and cellphones (Allsop et al., 2007). Because of this, firms have needed to find a way to promote positive WOM and reduce the amount of negative WOM. Additionally, studies have shown that consumers rely more heavily on word of mouth than company-generated content because they perceive recommendations from other social users online as more trustworthy than the companies themselves (Chu & Kim, 2011). According to Allsop et al. (2007), consumers find these reviews to be more unbiased because they have undergone a filter of “people like me.” Thus, consumers have come to rely heavily on UGC as an E-WOM (Owusu et al., 2016).

2.2 The Rise of Social Media

Influencer marketing emerged through social media, and as such, social media is important in explaining influencer marketing’s rise and subsequent popularity. Social media emerged through the adoption of the Internet and can be described as “a collection of web-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).” While more recently consumers look at social media (e.g. dating sites) to make new connections, most researchers agree that social networking was primarily started to maintain and consolidate offline relationships. Relationships that are built online are “based on weak links and require an offline element such as a shared interest,” (e.g. shared location) (Romero et al., 2011, p. 171). Thus, social networking sites allow for the creation of contacts between users with shared interests and the formation of entire online communities that can have open dialogue between one another. Social media has become so popular due to the social identity theory, which argues that social media is vital in shaping one’s ‘self-concept,’ based on personal traits and

abilities, as well as belonging to a human group. (Wang, 2015) This gives social media an edge over traditional media because it is both interactive and participatory in nature (Shankar et al., 2016).

In the wake of the digital age, global companies are finding it difficult to understand how social media can impact their brand equity (Booth & Matic, 2011). Consumers are gaining more control with new means of expressing themselves. With less control over marketing reputations, marketers need to look deeper into the drivers of how they can regain control over their company reputation. Thus, there is value in using it to share corporate messages amongst its consumers. The bond of consumers with the company affect how they will communicate with others to attempt to influence behavior through WOM on social media, including making purchases (Allsop et al., 2007).

2.3 The Social Media Influencer

In recent years, social media has been a gateway to reach consumers who are highly engaged and can shape perceptions of an organization, attempting to influence them. An opinion leader is someone defined as anyone whose voice is strongly regarded in the media. This has shifted away from being someone with prestige and fame such as a celebrity to the average consumer (Kilgour et al., 2017). Now, ordinary consumers can get ‘likes’ and gain many followers very quickly, and with such a following base they become the ‘social media star.’ Just like celebrity endorsements, influencers on social media can influence their followers through brand-related UGC (Martensen et al., 2018). While many of the popular social media influencers become social media stars and have over 100,000 followers, there is a second category of followers called the “micro-influencer.” The latter may have a small, but extremely dedicated pool of followers (Wissman, 2018).

It is no doubt that companies want to take advantage of these influencers on social media. They do this by compensating the influencer to publicly use or consume their products. By using the influencer as an intermediary, information is converted from a mass-media source to that of a member of the community (Ioanid et al., 2015). As someone whose voice is valued, the communication around these companies and their products becomes a highly influential source of information. Influencer marketing has proven to be very successful, with a high return on investment in areas such as reach, engagement, and sales (Swant, 2016). It is no longer a question of whether a company should use influencer marketing in their advertisement efforts, but instead what strategy should be used to most effectively utilize it.

How influencers exert influence is up for debate and many theories have been developed to explain this phenomenon. For the purpose of this research, the Source Credibility Model (SCM) will be used. The SCM argues that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are the main pillars for exerting influence on their followers (Wang & Scheinbaum 2018). Expertise is defined as the perceived ability of the sender to make valid assertions, based on whether he or she is qualified to provide valid and accurate information or discuss a topic. Trustworthiness is defined as the expectation held by consumers that the provider of information is dependable and can be relied on to deliver promises (Martensen et al., 2018). This resembles WOM communication, where consumers look for unbiased reviews. Lastly, attractiveness of the source from which consumers received the message is directly related to purchase intent. This relates to the influencer's outward physical appearance and looks. Consumers are said to be more likely to accept information from an attractive source (Wang & Scheinbaum 2018).

2.4 Online Purchase Intent and M-Shopping Adoption

With the increase in availability of smart phones, new retail opportunities have emerged through mobile shopping, which is the act of shopping online through a smartphone. Sites such as Amazon and eBay have allowed consumers to use yet another platform to online shop, making their sites mobile-friendly and targeting marketing efforts around this (Marriott et al., 2017). However, many are reluctant to shop online because consumers are unsure of the quality of the products/services they will receive (Assarut, 2015). This feeling of unease is amplified using mobile phones. To date, mobile shopping remains the most unpopular shopping avenue (Heinemann and Schwarzl, 2010). However, when used effectively, mobile can provide many benefits to firms, including targeting shoppers and their locations in real-time, as well as permission-based personalization (Shankar et al., 2016). Intentions to adopt mobile shopping include utilitarian motives such as convenience and accessibility. The more experience in shopping online, the more likely they are to shop on a mobile device. Factors such as interface design and connectivity also played a role in adoption (Marriott et al., 2017). On the other hand, explanations for the lack of adoption of m-shopping includes shoppers being wary of privacy breaches of financial/payment information and feeling a lack of overall vendor trust (Marriott et al., 2017). Additionally, consumers were found to be resistant to commercial and marketing messages received on their phone because they regard it as a personal device (Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017).

The above literature review will serve as a summary of existing literature on the topic and establish the framework under which this research will be conducted. As mentioned previously, the SCM will be used as a basis for validating research and outlining new findings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Strategy

The purpose of this study is to understand motivation and drivers of online purchases in the context of social media, which is tied to the relationship between the influencer and the consumer. It attempts to answer the research question by providing new insights into the topic of Influencer Marketing, as well to validate prior research outlined in the literature review. Due to the limited amount of research available on the relatively new phenomenon of Influencer Marketing, qualitative research methods were selected over quantitative techniques. The scope and scale of existing literature prevents the researcher from developing relevant quantitative hypotheses to test. Instead, semi-structured interviews were used to uncover new insights into the field of interest, particularly to understand the motivations and detailed experiences of the consumers. Data was analyzed using the Gioia Methodology, which allowed the researcher to develop themes and assign concepts to identified patterns within the data set (Gioia et al., 2013).

3.2 Data Sample

The demographic of the sample for this study is shown in the Table 1. General information such as name, age, sex, average time spent on social media, and occupation were collected prior to the interview to get an overview of social media presence and to confirm criteria for participating in the study. The interviewees identified and selected were Millennials, spanning the age of 22 to 29, who spend between 1- and 5-hours total on social media per day. A snowball sampling technique was used to select participants. This is a referral-based technique for selecting interviewees, where participants are asked to recommend someone within their network that has a shared interest in the topic of research (Geddes et al., 2017). Participants were first contacted via Facebook, and then arrangements to meet in person at a given data and time

were made. Both sexes were interviewed, and all participants were based in the United States.

While the preferred social media channel was not a relevant criterion, the fact that all

interviewees use Instagram the most helped narrow the focus and context for this research.

Table 1 -Interview Participants' Demographics

Name	Age	Sex	Average # of Hrs. Spent on Social Media per Day	Preferred Social Media Channel	Occupation
(1) Adriana Levy	26	Female	1.5	Instagram	Registered Nurse
(2) Alex Vickery	25	Female	3	Instagram	English Teacher
(3) Annie Rodgers	25	Female	2	Instagram	Student
(4) Debbie Alicea	27	Female	5	Instagram	HR Manager
(5) Drake Brooks	27	Male	2	Instagram	Web Developer
(6) Hannah Fields	25	Female	2	Instagram	Student
(7) Jackie Weiss	25	Female	2	Instagram	Student
(8) Jelita Adams	27	Female	2.5	Instagram	Account Manager
(9) Maria Vasquez	25	Female	3	Instagram	Student
(10) Mauro Di Pinto	25	Male	3	Instagram	Student
(11) Michael Arlia	29	Male	1	Instagram	Account Manager
(12) Sirpa Anneli	26	Female	3	Instagram	Student
(13) Steph Pflugfelder	25	Female	2	Instagram	Student
(14) Vivien Caetano	25	Female	4	Instagram	Consultant
(15) Will Hinds	26	Male	4	Instagram	Architect

3.3 Data Collection

The data was collected through 15 semi-structured interviews, each lasting 25 minutes on average. Interviews were conducted in person, in a quiet and comfortable setting including cafes or apartments between October and November 2018. Small-talk was employed and a brief overview of the research topic was given prior to the interview. This attempted to promote an open environment. Interviewees were encouraged to use as much detail as possible and provide specific examples when applicable. All participants agreed to being recorded for analysis purposes and conversations continued after recording had stopped in order to confirm no changes in attitude. Questions asked were open-ended, separated by general topics: Influencer Marketing,

Content, and Purchase Intent. First, participants were asked about general social media habits, what they knew about influencer marketing, and what relationships they had with any social media influencers. In the ‘content’ section, questions asked included likes and dislikes of content, as well as expectations of content produced by influencers. Finally, participants were asked questions around purchase intent and past purchases made via influencers. Segues were made leading into each category of questions. Occasionally, additional questions were asked in order to help then interviewee elaborate when more details were needed.

3.4 Data Analysis

Following the interviews, data collected was organized into first-order concepts, then second-order themes to be further categorized into aggregate dimensions, according to the Gioia Methodology. The goal was to find commonality amongst the data which was varied according to each participant’s experiences, proving especially challenging when considering the different influencer subject genres. Data analysis ceased when data reached a saturation point, specifically when new concepts stopped emerging and no new insights were generated (Gioia et al., 2013).

During the first-order concept generation, numerous and seemingly unrelated concepts were listed out. Only following the data saturation point did the second-order theme generation begin. Second-order themes were identified by finding commonalities amongst the first order concepts using NVIVO software. Once themes had been generated, they were further grouped into aggregate dimensions. This data structure is shown in Table 2 and Figure 1. The relationship between the three aggregate dimensions was developed and is explained by Figure 2, the “Path to Online Purchase Intent” model, developed by the discovered grounded theory, which will be explained in the ‘Results’ section to follow.

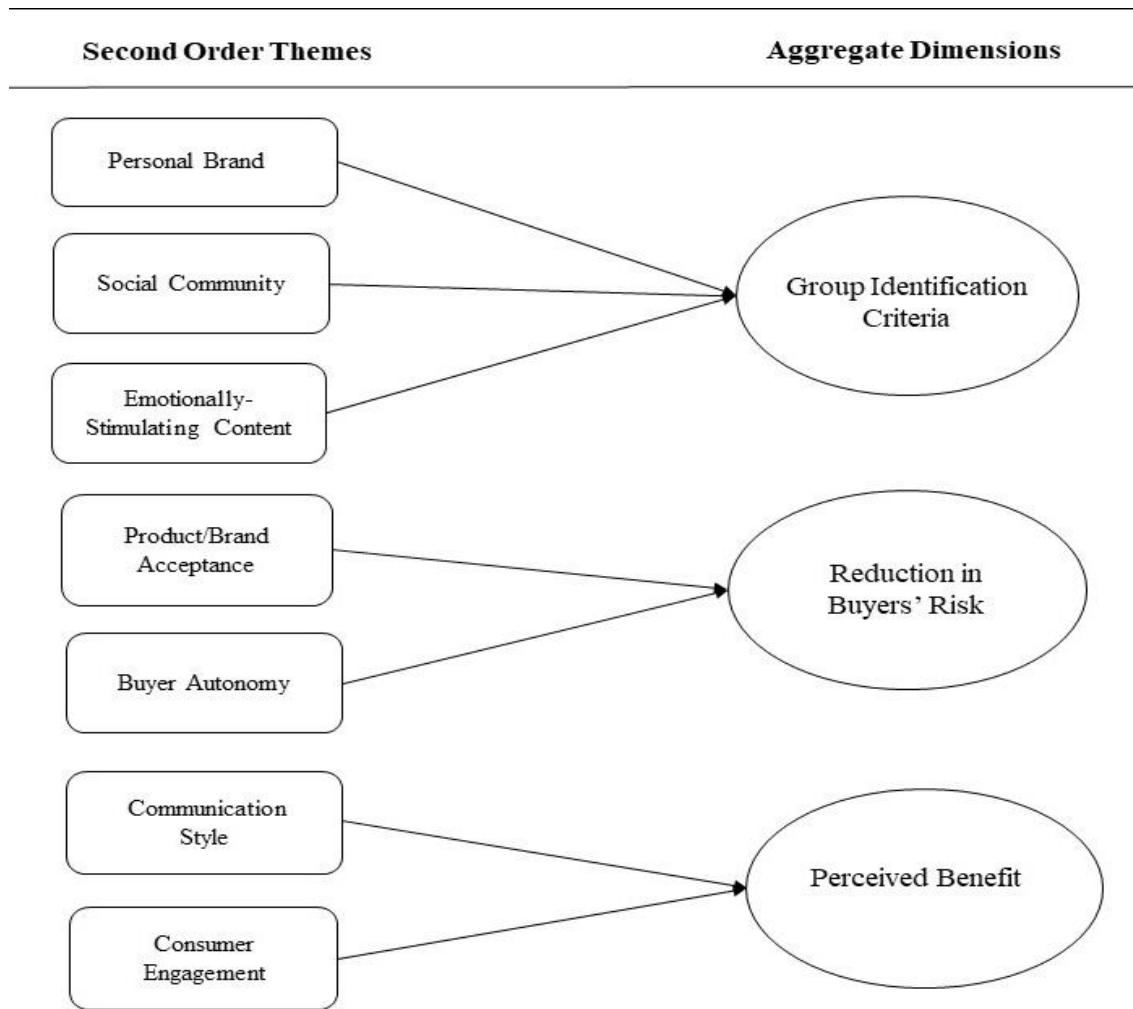
4. Results

Results varied amongst participants as each interviewee had its own category or genre of influencers they followed, including but not limited to fashion, comedy, and fitness. As such, each person's relationship with the influencers they followed were directly related to the kind of accounts they were. Quotations from the interviews were selected and used to support the aggregate concepts and themes identified in the data analysis.

Table 2 – Data Structure

First Order Concepts	Second Order Themes
Influencers should serve as aspirational figures Leverage talent in a specific subject matter/shared interest Be relatable and give insight about personal life	Personal Brand
Influencers should partner with other influencers Seek out their own audience of like-minded consumers Environment should mimic traditional word of mouth	Social Community
Posts should be aesthetically appealing Bold images with motivational captions Sharing relatable struggles and challenges	Emotionally Stimulating Content
Need to reduce search time in decision making process Seek out reviews and testimonials on websites Wary of unknown brands and sites Influenced by positive comments on profile and followers	Product/Brand Acceptance
Desire to see details about product through different means and over time Appropriate mix of promotional and personal content Want to avoid feeling pressured by influencer	Buyer Autonomy
Influencer should use passive voice Use positive and open body language and tone Give honest feedback about products and recommendations	Communication Style
Content should match user expectations Influencers should ask questions and respond frequently to comments and messages Content should be centered on promoting win-win situations	Consumer Engagement

Figure 1 – Data Structure Cont.



4.1 Group Identification

The first aggregate dimension is ‘Group Identification,’ which refers the overarching desire to feel included in a certain social group or category. During interviews, questions attempted to uncover why individuals followed certain influencers. Interviewees said they wanted to follow people that focused on one specific subject matter that they had a shared interest in. They also outlined the need to have traits in common with the influencer and expressed the desire to follow someone that was very good at something that they also wanted to be good at. These

factors make up an influencer's personal brand. For example, participant 1 follows athletes in the CrossFit community and said, *"When I first joined CrossFit, I wanted to follow the perennial powerhouses in the industry so that I could learn about the workouts and sort of model myself after that."* He follows the best competitors because he wants to be like them, learn from them because they are the best in the sport. He also looks up to them as aspirational figures. Participant 15, on the other hand follows clay makers and artists. Since he is an architect, he says, *"I relate it a lot to the work that I'm doing in the office."* As an artist himself, he looks to follow others who have a similar style as his to get inspiration. Participant 4 also shared her perspective, saying that she is *"more attracted to people who are also from New York or from the East Coast than people from the west coast because I feel more connected to them."* Relatability is key here, in order to find common ground between the influencer and the consumer.

Another factor at play in group identification is the sense of belonging in a social community. Due to the inherently social nature of Instagram and other social media channels, Instagram is not only a place where consumers can interact directly with an influencer, but also where they can interact with other like-minded individuals. Respondents mentioned that in following a certain influencer that has an overarching theme or genre to their account can make them feel like they have been opened to an entire community of individuals and other influencers. It can also allow for users to consult with one another through comments and messages. Participant 2 demonstrated exactly this in saying, *"If I am a part of that community and have similar interests or have gone through similar experiences, I am going to want to build those relationships with others that I don't necessarily know."* She also added that she recognizes that *"influencers often have to go out there and cultivate their own audience, they won't always come to you."* This is often how respondents have discovered other similar influencers because they

have established relationships with each other, so it's not only a network of followers, but a growing network of other influencers as well, sharing advice.

Emotionally stimulating content is another determinant of group identification. This refers to posts and stories on Instagram that appeal to the eye or are bold and surprising (within the realm of their Instagram feed/genre). Participant 7 expressed that the post, *"has to be something that is really outstanding, like a background in an exotic place like Thailand or somewhere I want to go with amazing scenery."* Other respondents said their content must be shown with passion and demonstrate real emotions by the influencer. Participant 13 added to this by saying, *"if someone that shows their true face like posting a picture without makeup or just makes an effort to go outside of their comfort zone then that's worth showing support for."* This is comparable to participant 9's comment about the fitness blogger she follows, who openly disclosed that she had an accident and broke her jaw, leading for her to get several teeth replaced. Despite being embarrassed about revealing that she had fake teeth, this allowed her to connect on a deeper level to her followers. Admitting to struggles brings the aspirational figure or opinion leader down from the pedestal that the followers have put them on. This thereby reduces walls between the influencer and its followers, showing that they too have challenges and imperfections that their followers may also face, reinforcing the community feeling and their relatability. Participant 2's comment that *"They are like your friend but your somewhat cooler friend,"* adds to the fact that they belong to the same community that you wish to be a part of or identify with, but still aspire to be like. The desire to be a part of that same group is a big motivator for both engagement and online purchase intent.

4.2 Reduction in Buyer's Risk

The second aggregate dimension is 'Buyer's Risk.' All interviewees commented on the need to assess legitimacy of websites or products needing to take steps to seek out additional information before considering any type of purchase made through Instagram. This was found to be as a result of buyer's risk aversion, related to security, satisfaction, or wasted time.

Respondents were asked what content they do not like seeing from influencers, and interviewees agreed upon disliking when the influencer promotes products too frequently and when their *"main priority is giving you their discount code so they make money off of commission."* (Participant 1, 2018) Thus, they expressed the need to be a balance between promotional posts and personal posts because consumers do not want to feel pressured into buying something that may result in negative consequences. Participant 8 mentioned, "if the bulk of their posts are mostly sponsored content then I wouldn't follow them because it feels like it becomes spam after a certain point." Interviewees said influencers should have an appropriate mix of personal updates and promotional content. *"I like when they relate the product back to how it's helping them in their real life. So it's things that you already know and there's a story that you can follow along with them in that case,"* she added. This reduces the feeling of perceived risk to the consumer, because they have used it themselves. In demonstrating this, Participant 14 said that product placement was important. She follows a fitness influencer and said, *"she has been posting herself drinking this green drink it took me a while to realize if she was being sponsored or if she actually believed in it. She did this for six months and then only until recently she posted this ad picture of it."* Showing that you use the product over a prolonged time can lead to brand acceptance rather than *"exclusively posting a picture of a physical item once, which doesn't really show us that you use it,"* as participant 1 said. This leads to a higher

degree of trust and perception that the recommendation is truthful, and the influencer's motivations are not purely economically-driven. Additionally, sharing details and different means of displaying products are effective in reducing this risk. Participant 7 demonstrated this in saying that, *"videos are great because if you want to see the product you don't just want the picture because everybody knows that in a picture you can be deceived."* Deception is something interviewees noted wanting to avoid, especially they were thinking about a purchase from an unknown brand.

Regarding the avenue and path to online purchase intent, almost all respondents made their influencer-driven purchases through an online website. They expressed that all occasions were new brands that they had never shopped with, and thus needed to see a legitimate website with the ability to return or exchange, supported by reviews. Participant 9 said, *"I think I have to know what I'm buying ahead of time and I know that I'm not going to have to return it, so it has to be like a reputable site."* Participant 2 added to this by saying she wants the process to be seamless and easy, stating, *"I think it's more work to be constantly redirected from one app to another app or another page then having to browse there than just going directly to the page."* Participant 5 mentioned he is *"pretty wary about clicking on random links. You don't necessarily see any of the website, so it could be a scam. I would probably trust it if it were amazon or another big website, but I'm paranoid because of privacy reasons."* Participant 10 also supported this argument, particularly expressing the needing to do a google search to see reviews and testimonials of others who have purchased a product from that site or brand. He also added that he feels more secure when he sees many positive comments by other consumers on the influencer's profile. When asked what factors would influence the interviewees to purchase online through an Instagrammer, they reported wanting more convenience and

interconnectedness, reducing search time so they don't have to take additional measures to seek out the product or reviews from a new brand they would be considering purchasing from.

Participant 4 showed this in saying, I would want to see influencers *“using more credible sites like Nordstrom. Something that is super easy to get to and fast to check out, but reputable at the same time.”*

Overall results showed that users want to feel like they have the autonomy to make decisions about purchases on his/her own rather than feel pressured by an influencer. They also take several steps to confirm legitimacy of the website when it is a new brand in order to reduce any sort of perceived risk from making a purchase online through Instagram. This perceived risk is heightened by mobile phones.

4.3 Perceived Benefit

The final aggregate dimension is 'Perceived Benefit,' which is the usefulness and relevance provided to the consumer in following the opinion leader or influencer. Interviewees stressed that they want influencers to have a certain communication style. When asked what traits were important for their influencers to possess, all respondents expressed the need for them to be open and honest. Participant 6 said, *“She's very open...She talks about what she is going for, like how her father is very ill. She doesn't do it for attention, but she wants to unite people. I feel that makes her seem more honest. And if she is promoting a product, I feel it's something she actually supports.”* This creates a connection between being open about their personal life and being able to trust the influencer more when it comes to promotional content. Participant 2 said she wants it to feel like, “it's a real person and this recommendation is coming in their own voice,” meaning they want it to be in a passive voice, as if they are receiving a tip from a friend rather than a brand.

The other side of establishing a perceived benefit in the mind of the consumer is revolved around consumer engagement, recognizing that influencer marketing is not one-sided. In fact, it is the opposite, and consumers should be heavily involved. Interviewees said that it is important for them to be able to reach out and exchange information freely with the influencers they follow. Participant 2 added, *“I think that by asking questions they can engage with their audience to try and organize their strategy around those responses. That means responding to direct messages and comments.”* Participant 9 said, *“I’ve also sent direct messages to influencers a couple times to ask something as simple as like I love the lipstick you are wearing, where is it from? If it is not specifically listed and it is nice that they respond.”* Interview respondents also said they like when their influencers post things like giveaways, which promote win-win situations. Participant 2 said, *“I will enter giveaways through the Instagram comments, “which was among how she engaged with the influencers that she followed. Involving their followers in a situation where they are giving away something for free that a company has gifted them not only allow influencers to boost their numbers in promoting number of likes, but also gives followers the opportunity to win something free of cost to them.”*

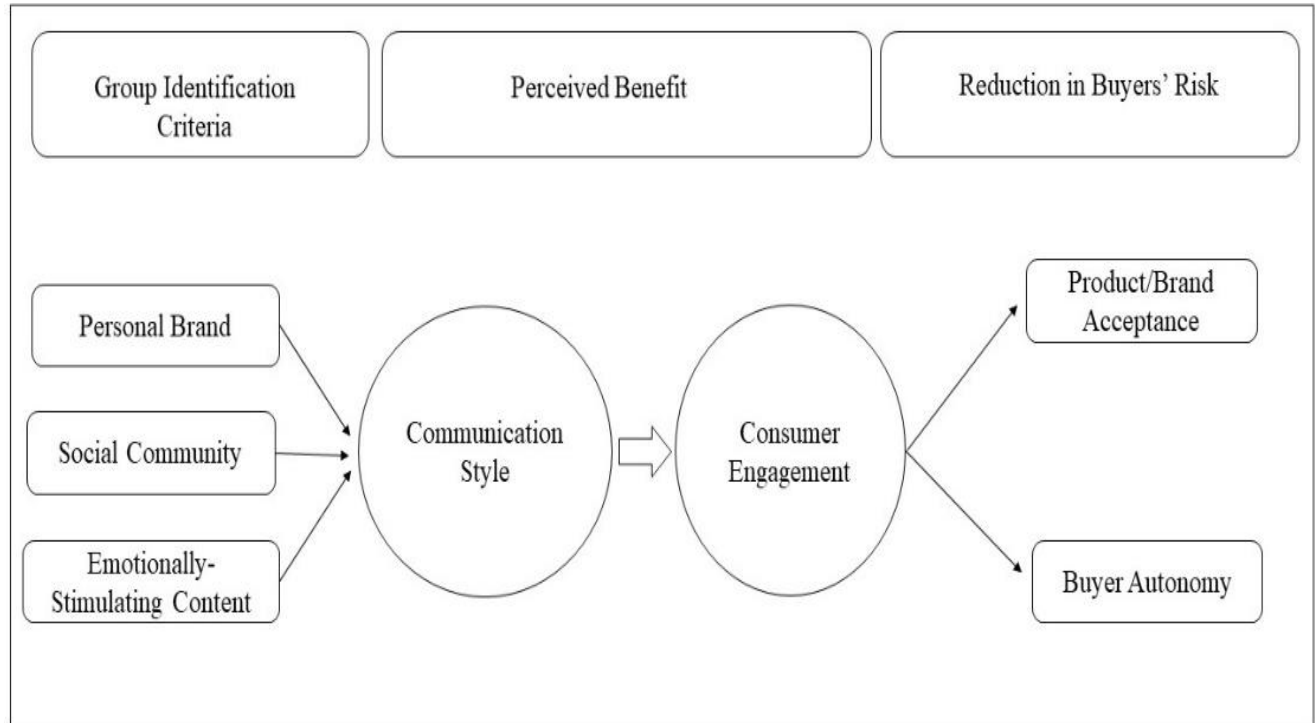
Lastly, this study showed that consumers need the influencers to match their expectations about why they followed the account in the first place, expecting to see consistency. Some reported that they regard accounts as places to learn, gain inspiration, or simply as sources of entertainment. Thus, content of the influencers should be consistent and continue to provide this to the consumer. For example, participant 14 initially followed physical therapists to learn how to do exercises to cope with specific pain management for her wrists. She said, *“My hands kept getting bad I wanted something just for legs to avoid using my wrists...and that’s specifically what she was talking about.”* The content she was posting continued matched up with exactly

what she wanted to see, and she ended up buying a workout plan that was just for that. Participant 15, on the other hand, follows architects and artists on Instagram and does not look to the accounts to learn from them. He mentioned, *“I’m not particularly interested in the way that they produce their art. For example, I’m more interested in the photography they make as opposed to the camera or filter that they use.”* Thus, he is looking for the result rather than to learn from how it is produced, and that is why the profile posting only artwork over different processes worked for him. It opened his awareness to a series of mugs which he purchased online. Similarly, participant 5 follows meme or comedy accounts purely for entertainment purposes. He said, *“I guess it depends on the type of account. Certain scenarios like the meme accounts I wouldn’t care but if it’s certain content curated around someone’s personality then yes.”* Participant 14 cited another example where an influencer that she initially followed because of fitness *“started out providing useful information, but her stories changed, and I disconnected from her...I think part of it has become more obvious that she’s trying to sell her products – essential oils but recently she’s using only those products and talking about them.”* Thus, inconsistent content and deviation from the initial reasons for following leads to decreased engagement and potential for unfollowing. Specific needs differed amongst profile genres, but in the end they all needed to match what the users expected out of their content, in order to perceive that benefit, which is directly tied to purchase intent.

4.4 Model “Path to Online Purchase Intent”

The model in Figure 2 shows the aggregate dimensions that arose from the data structure and organizes them according to how they relate to one another. It shows the most important aspects of the relationship between influencer and follower, which ultimately increase online purchase intent.

Figure 2 – Model “Path to Online Purchase Intent”



5. Discussion

We have confirmed that elements of an influencer’s personal brand, the ability to produce content that effectively draws on emotions, and the promotion of being part of a community are all criteria for the consumer to feel like they are a part of the group that the influencer belongs to and identifies with. This directly related to the social identity theory defined by Wang (2015), as well as the motivations behind E-WOM which say that humans have an innate need to be social and to interact with others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). While ‘expertise’ was reported as something that interviewees deemed very important for influencers to possess in a certain subject area, it was not considered the sole motivation for purchase intent. Relatability also proved to be very important in this, so that people could get the unbiased reviews that have gone through the filter of “people like me.” (Allsop et al., 2007)

The next element of the SCM is ‘source attractiveness,’ which can be compared to the aggregate dimension of perceived benefit to the consumer. The results showed that while elements of physical attractiveness and number of followers are important to consumers, the quality of information being conveyed is even more important to their target audience. This goes back to the concept of micro-blogger, which takes away importance from people with a celebrity-level following with over 100,000 followers (Wissman, 2018). When people find something that meets their expectations, it encourages engagement with the influencer.

The perceived benefit provided to the customer is ultimately what leads them to decide how much risk will be involved from them in making a purchase, related to the third element of the SCM which is ‘trustworthiness.’ The results found that this is one of the most important elements of purchase intent, and it is directly tied to the risk aversion faced in considering purchases that have been influenced by social media, especially on their mobile phones. Very few respondents purchased items directly on their mobile phone, confirming that M-shopping is still an innovation that has not been widely accepted by the public (Heinemann and Schwarzl, 2010). This is because there is a high degree of risk associated with it and consumers like to take other measures to verify a website’s credibility through another device during their decision-making process. This happens especially in the case of an unknown brand or website they have never shopped from before. This directly relates to the vendor trust aspect outlined by (Marriott et al., 2017). Most interviewees would be more likely to shop directly through Instagram when it is a site they know and trust.

5.1 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Research proves that Influencer Marketing is a successful tactic to drive sales and help build brand awareness for companies. This study has outlined the factors that are taken into

consideration and has explored in consumer purchase intent. It also sheds light on the negative traits of influencers and potential barriers to shopping online directly through channels such as Instagram. Due to the popularity and rise of influencer marketing within the last few years, there are more costs to firms themselves and companies arguably have less control over their marketing in this context. This is because they are relying on other individuals to effectively spread messages about their brand. Additionally, there is stronger competition due to a larger pool of influencers to choose from. Due to the success of influencers, their own value and compensation requirements have also increased. Thus, there are several strategies and steps firms should take when vetting influencers for a partnership.

Firms should aim to select influencers that embody the qualities outlined in the data. It is vital that the influencers possess traits that align with a brand's core values and "genre" so that they can successfully target their audience while remain true to their own brand. Firms should recognize that influencers are also selective about partnering with companies, that their partnership is a two-way street, and should be fostered through a constant line of open communication. They should work with them to provide feedback, and together look at measurable analytics.

Companies working with influencers should also seek to take advantage of third-party affiliate apps like 'LikeToKnowIt' and get the proper resources for their own mobile sites, so that consumers can feel more comfortable making purchases online through social media. Any added convenience and technical ease will lead to increase sense of credibility, resulting in increased sales and revenue.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations are present in every study, and there were a few to point out in this research. The first limitation is the nature of research topic itself, which seeks to understand motivation behind online purchase intent. There are many external factors that can affect purchase intent such as environmental conditions, mood, personal attributes, among many others. Thus, it may be difficult to determine causality strictly from consumers' past experiences with influencers and the intricacies of their relationships. Another limitation to point out was in the sampling. Despite efforts to include participants of both sexes, most interviewees were females. Participants that had a high involvement with influencers were selected, as they would be most useful for this study. However, because of the overwhelming number of influencers in areas such as fashion and beauty, audiences tended to be female. As such, it was difficult to generalize findings amongst both genders. A third limitation is analyzing the research in the context of Instagram only. While it is the main social media channel in which consumers engage with influencers, future researchers of this topic may be interested in exploring consumer purchase intent and how they vary across different channels such as YouTube, Twitter, or Snapchat. Another suggestion could be to use quantitative techniques to explore the relationship between specific content posted on Instagram and how consumers react to each one, analyzing how their purchase intent changes under different circumstances (e.g. images and captions).

6. Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to explore the relationship between the influencer and follower, analyzing consumer motivations for online purchases and their relation to one another. Through 15 semi-structured interviews, participants were asked several open questions about the influencers they followed and their relationships with them. Questions were centered around

three main topics: influencer marketing, user-generated content, and purchase intent. Responses to these questions validated the Source Credibility Model outlining attractiveness, expertise, and trust as important drivers of influence. The results and discussion go deeper to describe these drivers in the context of online purchase intent. The first driver is **group identification**, as followers want to associate themselves with the aspirational member of a community that they wish to be a part of. The second is **perceived benefit** to the consumer, affected by the way that the influencer communicates with its followers, as well as the level of engagement with the follower. Finally, the third determinant of purchase intent is degree of **risk involved**, assessed through the amount of trust in the influencer as well as brand/product being considered in a purchase. The degree of risk is one of the most important drivers of purchase intent, and it was found to be heightened in the context of mobile phones due to privacy and security concerns.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Influencer Marketing

- 1) How would you define influencer marketing?
- 2) What makes you classify someone as an influencer/blogger?
- 3) Which kinds of influencers do you follow on social media?
- 4) What are their roles and what kind of content do they produce?
- 5) What led you to follow these influencers?
- 6) What personal characteristics of influencers are most important to you?
- 7) In what ways do they exhibit these characteristics on their account?

Content

- 1) What type of content do you like to see from influencers?
- 2) What type of content do you dislike seeing?
- 3) How often and in what ways do you interact with influencers?
- 4) Can you tell me about the type of content you do engage with (like, watch, or share)?
- 5) Can you give me an example of what it would look like?
- 6) How do you feel about sponsored content?

Online Shopping Purchase Intent

- 1) Can you tell me a bit about your online shopping habits?
- 2) Can you tell me about a time an influencer has peaked your interest in a product?
- 3) Why did you make the decision to purchase it?
- 4) How was your satisfaction with the product you purchased?
- 5) How did your relationship with the influencer change post-purchase?
- 6) Under what circumstances would you be more likely to purchase online?